NPC
SUPPORTING PARENTS
SUPPORTING CHILDREN

EARLY YEARS

Supporting Your Child's Positive Mental Health

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"Children's mental health is a state of wellbeing that allows children to develop and become aware of their own unique personality, to build their own identity, to fulfil their own potential, to cope with the challenges of growing up, to feel loved, secure and accepted as unique individuals and to be able to be happy, play, learn and to participate and contribute to family and community." (St Patrick's Mental Health Services)

Good mental health is essential for the well-being of all children.
Children's well-being is connected to:
Feeling good socially – This means having good relationships with family and friends which help children grow and develop and reach their potential.

Feeling good emotionally – This means being able to understand, express and manage the way they feel.

Feeling good physically – This means having a healthy body and being able to physically do all the things they want to do.

Good mental health is made up of a range of different emotions and abilities, it is like a jigsaw with lots of pieces. If children have positive mental health, they are more likely to feel happy and content and be the best that they can be in all areas of their lives including their education and friendships.

Your child's mental health can be supported in their everyday life at home, in pre-school and in the community around them. However, as a parent you have the biggest influence on the development of your child's good mental health, which does not mean that your child will not experience challenges and worries, these are a normal part of life for us all. Rather having good mental health means that your child will be better able to cope with challenges as they arise.

HOW EVERYDAY LIFE CAN IMPACT POSITIVELY ON YOUR CHILD'S MENTAL HEALTH

We all have needs that must be met to keep us happy and healthy, and it will help you as a parent to be aware of these needs. Our bodies have basic needs that must be met to survive and stay well. The reason that these needs are important to mental health is because physical and mental health rely upon each other, it is difficult to have one without the other. If our basic needs are not met then it can be difficult for us to put energy into the other things in our lives, like playing, learning, growing, and making and keeping friendships and relationships.

HOW CAN WE SUPPORT OUR CHILDREN'S BASIC NEEDS?

Food & Nutrition

Making sure that your child eats nutritious balanced meals each day for breakfast, lunch and dinner will help their bodies grow and develop.

Being Active

Being active and getting enough exercise is an important part of supporting your child's mental health.

Warmth & Shelter

Warmth and shelter are a basic need and an important part of supporting your child's mental health. No matter where we live and who we live with, it is important that children have a safe place to call their home, with people that love them and that they feel a sense of belonging.

Routines

Creating routines for your child and family is an important part of supporting your child's mental health. Routines help us all to feel secure, be prepared and know what to expect, and this is an important part of life for children.

How much sleep a child needs will differ from child to child, a good indication of whether your child is getting enough sleep and rest is by thinking about their mood in the morning when they wake up. If they are usually happy to get up and start their day, then it is a good sign that they are getting what they need.

Time to relax together is also important, make time each day to focus on your child and relax together away from the demands of everyday life.

Love

Loving your child and making them feel loved is an important part of supporting your child's mental health, love is the starting point for good mental health. The love that you show to your child and the love that they feel will give them the confidence to grow, learn and explore the world around them. It will give your child a sense of wellbeing and a "bank" of happy and positive memories, positive thoughts and feelings about themselves that will stay with them all through their lives.

Esteem

Esteem is a basic need for all children, and it can be broken down into two areas, self esteem, which is about a child's overall sense of worth, this is supported by experiencing achievement, learning new skills and growing in independence. The second part of esteem is the need to be noticed and appreciated by others, including parents, friends and teachers. The development of esteem is an important part of positive mental health and supporting your child's esteem is part of your role as a parent.

To help your child with this you can spend time connecting with them, for example talking to your child about what they like doing, who do they enjoy playing with and what they did at pre-school. All these little things are special to the relationship between you and your child.

Take notice of your child, is there anything that they have recently learned to do? This can be any kind of achievement such as learning a new song or putting on their own coat. Remember to praise your child's efforts as well as their achievement and tell them why you are proud of them. For example, I noticed that you tried so hard to do all the buttons up on your coat, I am so proud of you.

If your child goes to pre-school have regular chats with their pre-school teacher. Find out what they are enjoying, who they like to play with and share with the pre-school teacher information about your child at home. By doing this together you can work together and create a partnership with your pre-school.

Emotions

Helping your child understand and manage their emotions, and cope when things don't go their way is an important part of supporting their mental health.

Being able to manage our emotions is not something we are born with; it is something we must learn to do. As a parent you are the most important role model in your child's life, this means that through your daily interactions with your child you can help them learn about and understand not only their own emotions and feelings but also the emotions and feelings of others in their lives.

Learning to manage feelings and emotions is something that children usually learn most about in the first five years of their lives. Young children can react to situations and experiences in the moment, and they sometimes get overwhelmed by their feelings. This means that they often act on their emotions without thinking about how it might affect them or those around them.

This is a very normal part of growing up and it is something that children will learn in small steps over time. Children learn about life by experiencing all of their emotions. Just like adults, children experience a variety of emotions. However, unlike adults, children often do not have the language or the ability to name these emotions. You can help your child with this by suggesting words that you think explain the way they are feeling.

Even uncomfortable or unpleasant emotions have an important part in our lives, for example children may become frustrated when they cannot complete a task but often this will drive them to try again and feeling sad about something is necessary to develop feelings of understanding towards others. While it can be your instinct to protect and shelter your child, it is important that you can show them how to manage these feelings as they happen. As your child grows up, they will need to learn to manage their emotions when you cannot be with them.

Empathy

Empathy comes from being able to understand the emotions of others and being able to act with kindness towards others. How your child learns about empathy is by noticing that the people around them may not feel the same way they do, by learning to name the way that they feel, by learning to put themselves in someone else's shoes and by learning to think about what might make someone feel better.

Your relationship with your child

Your relationship with your child is the biggest protection for their mental health and this can be developed and improved through active listening. Active listening is as much about listening to emotions as it is to words, and it can be an especially important part of the relationship that you have with your child. Having a relationship with your child during their early years, where you both listen to each other, can create a good habit for your relationship with your child all the way through their life.

It will most likely be small things that your child tells you when they are young, and it is likely that you will know much of what is going on in their life right now. However, by listening to your child actively, you are telling them that they are important and what they have to say to you is important to you. This will support your child's sense of wellbeing and create a parent-child relationship where listening to each other is important and valued all through your lives together. The relationship that you have now with your young child has many benefits, both now and in the future.

Resilience

Resilience is the ability to bounce back after experiencing situations or events that challenge us and are difficult to deal with. It is resilience that supports us to try again and not give up. Resilience is difficult to measure, and it is not something that you can physically see, and it only really becomes obvious when it is challenged by difficult or unpleasant situations.

We would hope that you and your child will only experience small setbacks in your lives, however there is not a different set of rules for having resilience during small or big setbacks. Resilience is something that develops gradually as we grow and meet different challenges. This means that as a parent you should try to be involved in your children's daily lives as much as possible to offer support or guidance when they need it.

You can help your child by asking them how they think they might solve any problems that they are faced with and see if you can come up with some solutions or different options together. There will be times when there is no way to solve the problem, and this may happen time and time again as they grow, but there are usually alternatives and options.

When children are consistently supported to react well to stressful or unpleasant experiences, they are more likely to bounce back now and in the future. Your child is learning that you are there for them when they need you.

As you can see, supporting your child's positive mental health is like a jigsaw puzzle with many different pieces that you can help your child put together.

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